

# PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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## Introduction

‘Philosophy of Religion’ refers to that branch of philosophy that studies the origin, nature, and purpose of religion from a rational perspective. Philosophy of religion begins with reason at its foundations. Philosophy of religion is concerned with religion itself, i.e., with themes such as the existence and nature of God, the knowledge of God, the problem of evil, religious experience, religious language, salvation, and immortality. It seeks to see whether such themes can be rationally explained. Both theology of religion and philosophy of religion, thus, constitute two different ways of approach to the study of religion.

## Philosophy of Religion

While theology of religion begins from a particular religious framework, philosophy of religion approaches religion from a purely rational and secular viewpoint. Philosophy of religion is the use of the philosophical method to study religion. It is not the study of a particular religious doctrine, rather is the study of the very nature, value, substance, and truth of religion.

The main themes studied under philosophy of religion are the existence of God, religious view of man, immortality, the problem of evil, religious experience and mysticism, religious knowledge, religious language, and religious conversion. Each of these themes is philosophically analyzed to determine the truth of religion. This section will briefly examine some of these.

### 1. The Existence of God

The existence of God is a major concern of the philosophy of religion. There are many views regarding the nature and existence of God, chief of which are polytheism, pantheism, monism, dualism, and monotheism. When talking of the existence of God, philosophers are mainly concerned with the monotheistic concept of God as presented in the Bible. The traditional proofs for the existence of God are three, *viz.*, the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, and the teleological argument. The ontological argument advanced by St. Anselm contends that since God is the greatest conceivable being, his existence is necessary; for if He didn’t exist, He would be equivalent to nothing and anything is greater than nothing, therefore anything would be greater than Him. However, nothing can be greater than Him because He is the greatest conceivable being. Therefore, God necessarily exists. The cosmological argument is the argument from cause and effect. It is based on the assumption that there cannot be an infinite series of cause-effect relations since that would never be exhaustible making it impossible to arrive at the present; therefore, the universe must have a cause which is uncaused and this uncaused cause of the universe is God. The teleological argument is the argument from order and design in the world. It contends that only the existence of an intelligent designer can explain the order and design of things in the universe. This intelligent designer, it claims, is God.

Critics have pointed out that the arguments for God’s existence are inadequate explanations. For instance, Hume pointed out that the cosmological argument is based on the unproven premise

that effects follow cause, while the teleological argument at the most can prove that the great designer is an imperfect being. He argued that polytheism is more easily inferable from the design argument than monotheism. In his words, “A great number of men join in building a house or ship, in rearing a city, in framing a commonwealth; why may not several deities combine in contriving and framing a world?”<sup>1</sup> In the same way, Kant saw in the classical arguments nothing but mental jumbles that disclosed nothing about reality.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Kantian skepticism doesn’t permit any proof that points beyond phenomena. In recent times, however, Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga have argued that belief of God can be regarded as a foundational belief that doesn’t even demand a proof, since it is basic.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Immortality

Immortality refers to the indestructible quality of the human soul. According to Plato, the fact that all knowledge is recollection is proof that the soul is immortal though the body is mortal.<sup>4</sup> Further, since life is an attribute of the soul, the soul cannot participate in its opposite, viz., death. Therefore, the soul can never die. Thus, the soul is logically seen to be immortal.

There are others who find in moral justice a ground for the immortality of soul. For, they argue, if the soul is not immortal, then justice is not guaranteed to all and injustice is elemental to the universe. The reality of justice demands a life hereafter in which the soul is rewarded good or evil for the deeds it has done in the body.<sup>5</sup> Different options are present for a philosopher before he can come to any conclusion by philosophical analysis. The materialistic notion is of annihilationalism, according to which the soul is coterminous with the body and dies with it. Reincarnationalism, on the other hand, argues that the body dies but the soul, which never dies, takes in a new body each time; thus, changing bodies as one changes garment. The Biblical teaching is of a resurrection in which the wicked will be resurrected to damnation while the righteous will be resurrected to life and glory. Annihilationalism doesn’t explain the administration of justice. Reincarnationalism cannot explain how the soul can be eternal and not just immortal and yet be finite at the same time. The theory of non-dualism attempts to relegate reincarnation to the deluded Self. However, it fails in adequately explaining how this Self came to be deluded. The linear aspect of time in the doctrine of resurrection, with its assurance of justice is the most logical alternative.

## 3. Religious Experience

Religious experience may be defined as a ‘seeming insight into usually unseen dimensions of existence, revealing something of intrinsic value and fundamental importance.’<sup>6</sup> It can be divided

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, “Against the Design Argument”, *Philosophy of Religion* 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (ed. John Hick; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 87

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norman Kemp Smith; <http://www.hkbu.edu.hk/~ppp/cpr/toc.html>, 1985), p. 518

<sup>3</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Religious Belief Without Evidence”, *Introduction to Philosophy* (ed. Louis P. Pojman; Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1991), p. 264

<sup>4</sup> *Phaedo* in Plato, *The Republic and Other Works* (trans. B. Jowett; New York: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 505-511

<sup>5</sup> Laxminidhi Sharma, *Dharma Darshan Ki Roop Rekha* (Allahabad: Abhivyakti Prakashan, 2000), p. 247.

<sup>6</sup> 13. *Religious Experience*, Autumn 2003, j.m.webber@sheffield.ac.uk

into four kinds: prayer, conversion, mysticism, and near-death experiences. Feeling the presence of God and receiving answers to prayer is a kind of religious experience. Conviction and insight are part of the experience of religious conversation which clearly manifests itself in a change of life. One other important kind of religious experience is mysticism in which one seems to have a direct intuition of reality. Some people who have experienced the near death tell of some supernatural experiences that they had when they were near death. Experience of either light or a dark tunnel feature much in such accounts. All such experiences have been attempted to be explained physiologically or psychologically. Philosophy acknowledges the fact that these experiences cannot be challenged by those who have not experienced them; however, it still remains to trace the logical implications of any beliefs connected with such experiences and to establish whether there exists any other source of knowledge apart from reason or empirical experience.

#### 4. Religious Language

Religious language refers to the nature of the language used when talking about God and supernatural things. Some believe that language is equivocal and that it cannot be used to speak about God, who can only be spoken about *via negative*, i.e., by means of negation. Others believe that words that refer to God and humanity mean the same thing. There are also those who stress the analogical aspect of religious language, according to whom language in religious discourse is analogous to language in secular discourse. However, logical positivists like A. J. Ayer and Rudolph Carnap have argued that all religious language is non-sensical since none of it is empirically understandable. The criterion of logical positivism, in turn, has been proven to be non-sensical since it is itself empirically unproven. The best position regarding religious language seems to be the view of 'forms of life' according to which religious language is only understandable to those who share in the particular form of religious life. To others, such language might make no sense. As Paul said, 'the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.'<sup>7</sup>

Thus, philosophy attempts to investigate the metaphysical and epistemological implications of religious doctrines. It also analyses the aspects of the religious life and experience that carry philosophical implications.

#### Conclusion

Philosophy of religion also has an important role to play in the life and ministry of the theologian. This is so because philosophy gives an overall picture of religious faith, practice, and experience in general and provides a common tool for evaluation. It helps to make a logical and rational assessment of the value or demerit of religious beliefs. It also helps one to understand the source or grounds of certain religious beliefs. However, it must be remembered that there cannot be a purely unbiased form of philosophy of religion since no one approaches religion with a blank slate of mind.<sup>8</sup> Yet, philosophy of religion does offer a common ground for dialogue between world religions. Therefore, philosophy of religion is of great importance to a theologian.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 2: 14

<sup>8</sup> Fred Berthold, Jr., *The Fear of God* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), p. 105

Thus, both theology and philosophy of religion are greatly beneficial to an individual preparing for or in ministry.

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